

In August 1975 the Black Theology Project sponsored a conference on the Black Church and Black Community in Atlanta attended by some 200 clergy and lay leaders. The participants at this working consultation issued a message at the end of their time together that spoke of the "moral, material and spiritual" crisis that confronts blacks today. And they located the "root problem" in "capitalism, nurtured by human wilfulness, and served by the exploitation of sexism and racism."

The journal *Sojourners* is significant as the vehicle for raising questions of economic and political analysis for a growing circle of evangelical Christians. The list could go on.

Whatever happens within these different groups will depend on the wider political climate. The struggle within the churches reflects that in the larger society. An example from a few years ago

The movements inside the church mirror those in the larger society

will illustrate this situation clearly:

In 1974, under the title "Theology in the Americas," a project was launched to bring together groups of Christian activists, church leaders, and theologians from North American and Latin America, along with some social scientists, to examine more closely the sources of oppression and to share reflections on the appropriate Christian response to

these problems. In preparation for a conference in Detroit in August 1975, 60 reflection groups were formed around the country to reflect on what their own experience had taught them concerning these issues.

At the conference itself, three strong responses to oppression emerged: among some white North Americans and the Latin Americans a powerful denunciation of class oppression and imperialism; among blacks a denunciation of racism; among women a denunciation of sexism. Inevitably, challenges arose, each group accusing the others of overlooking the special forms of oppression characteristic of its experience. The conference did not see a resolution of these differences.

Each of the interest groups that emerged at the conference (blacks, women, labor, white "middle class," Hispanics, Asian Americans, as well as professionals within the churches) was mandated

to seek to understand the interrelated nature of sexism, racism and class oppression in the context of international structures of domination and dependence. These groups are continuing to work under the umbrella of Theology in the Americas, seeking to promote structural social change and a return within the churches to an original identification with the oppressed in their struggles for justice.

Clearly, though, the issues are bigger than the churches; they are issues confronting all groups seeking justice and a better way of life for all.

In the midst of the battles for radical social change there is also a battle for the human soul, for human values and meaning and a new vision of human possibilities. This battle is already going on within the churches. How that battle is waged and resolved may have a lot to say about the future of social change in this country. ■

CLAUDE WILLIAMS: MERGING RELIGION & ACTIVISM +++

Bill Troy IN THE EARLY 1930s there appeared in the Deep South one of the most significant mass movements in the history of that region. Poor black and white farmers who had labored for years under various "sharecropping" arrangements came together during the Depression to form the Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU). Squeezed by declining cotton prices, absentee land ownership and a New Deal farm support policy that put free money into the hands of plantation owners, thousands of farm workers dropped their hoes and marched—in the face of organized terror—to demand a better day for themselves and their families. At its height the STFU counted some 20,000 members.

The movement raised some remarkable people into positions of leadership. One of the most unlikely, yet gifted, of them is still around. Claude Williams is a white preacher. He's 83 years old and lives in a trailer outside Birmingham, Ala.; where the force of his mind and personality are still enjoyed by a host of political friends dating from STFU days to the present.

When the sharecropper movement began in 1934 Claude Williams was pastoring a small Presbyterian mission church in the mining town of Paris, Ark. He lived there with Joyce King Williams and their two children.

Claude and Joyce had moved to Paris after serving an established Presbyterian church in Tennessee for seven years. During that time the social gospel and other forms of progressive thought began to penetrate the South, gradually helping the Williams to clarify their own growing recognition of the poverty and racial injustice around them. By the time they left for Paris, the fundamentalist faith of their upbringing had changed so radically that the conventional church could never hold them again.

In Paris they created a whirlwind. The town was desperately poor and the little church on the brink of extinction. Soon both were buzzing over the preacher who opened a pool hall in the church, encouraged the young people to read everything from the Bible to socialist theory to magazines on nudism, and preached sermons on the compatibility of the Bible and evolution.

Claude quickly became a friend and

champion to coal miners in the area trying to reorganize a union. While he was traveling the district speaking for the union, Joyce was keeping open house for miners, young people, children and anybody who needed a roof for the night or a bite to eat.

After four years the squires and ladies who ran the church got rid of the preacher for neglect of his duties. But by then the Williams had come into contact with the considerable political ferment taking place throughout Arkansas.

Both the Socialist Party and the Communist Party were active in the state. There were militant councils of the unemployed in Fort Smith and Little Rock. Exciting things were happening at Commonwealth College, Arkansas' famous labor school. And, first and foremost, there was the Southern Tenant Farmers Union.

In Claude Williams the STFU found one of its most effective organizers. This was due in part to the warmth and forcefulness of Claude's energetic personality. Raised in a sharecropper home in west Tennessee, he understood the people he was working with and was accepted by them. Much of the work required careful underground organization, meetings held by pre-arranged signal under cover of night. Local people understood that Claude was willing to accept the same dangers to which they were exposed.

There have been few radical movements in America that more effectively joined the efforts of poor blacks and poor whites. To Claude this dimension of STFU activity was a matter of unswerving principle. Many of the union's

most remarkable black leaders were recruited through his efforts. He carried out this conviction in a common sense way, devoid of the romanticism that afflicted so many activists from outside the region.

Neither did this commitment hamper his effectiveness with poor whites, whom he understood even better, having been one himself. One of the union's most remarkable recruits was a white sharecropper preacher named A.L. Campbell, who attended one of Claude's organizing meetings as a spy for the Ku Klux Klan. It was precisely Claude's forceful and reasonable attack upon "Ku Kluxism," as distinguished from individuals who belonged to the Klan, that brought Campbell over to the union's side.

But Claude's most distinctive contribution to the union lay in his religious approach to organizing. He had started his career as a fundamentalist Christian, then gone through successive changes influenced by modern Biblical interpretation, contemporary science, the social gospel and finally Marxism. At each step of the way, he felt impelled to reinterpret the Bible.

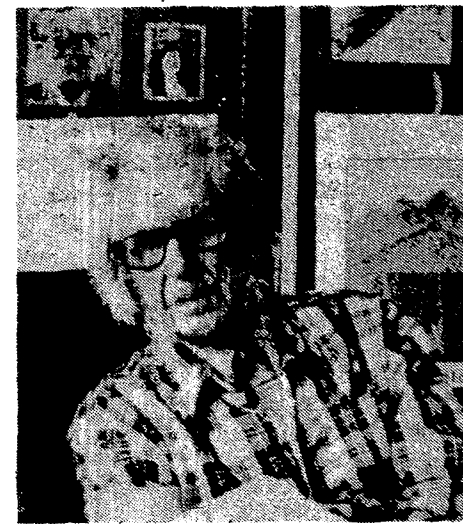
Sometime in the '30s, Claude read Lenin's *State and Revolution*. Finding it "the most revealing commentary on the Bible I had ever seen," he went back to "the Book" and found there the story of an international revolutionary people's movement. From Moses calling the first strike in Egypt to the Son of Man opposing the Roman Empire and its lackeys, the story was all of a piece.

At the same time Claude knew from his own experience the pervasiveness of religion among poor rural southerners. He knew the Bible was their primary guide for living, the church their major institution. Union organizing meetings often took place in churches and Claude soon found that unless the preacher went along with the union message, "we might as well go home."

Determining to use the people's religious framework to advantage, he learned to make the case for the union in terms of the "positive content of the gospel."

For seven years, beginning in 1940, he labored at this task through his own organization, the People's Institute of Applied Religion. First on behalf of the STFU and developing CIO activities in the South, later in the defense plants of wartime Detroit, the People's Institute formalized this religious approach to union organizing into a remarkable methodology.

Three to ten-day institutes would gather together up to 50 cotton field or defense plant working preachers and Sunday school teachers, black and white, male and female. They worked day and night, each session beginning with prayer, scripture and song.



Bill Troy

The Bible demands activism

The first day all were encouraged to share the most pressing problems their communities faced—food, shelter, wages, education, working conditions. Then an institute leader made a presentation based on these problems, using one of the unique orientation charts Claude devised in 1940.

The charts, by means of simple pictures and diagrams—always buttressed with Bible references—traced the story of "people's religion" and related that story to the concrete social and economic problems "of this world". The charts were presented sermon style, the kind of talks folks were used to hearing from someone "who had a conviction to impart."

Later sessions used mimeographed worksheets to analyze the political causes of people's suffering and to suggest collective remedies. Still others focused on concrete skills in union organizing. Throughout the meetings they sang, transforming a number of traditional hymns into some of today's best known freedom songs.

Among the interesting things to be learned from these unique assemblies, perhaps the most striking is the importance of meeting people on their own terms, in light of the positive, progressive aspects of their own view of the world.

Claude and his co-workers had a definite message to impart—the necessity for collective class struggle—but they did it by building on language, symbols and experience that people understood. The result was an intriguing experiment in workers' education based firmly in the historical reality of the Deep South. ■ Bill Troy is a Methodist minister associated with the Southern Appalachian Ministry in Higher Education, based in Knoxville, Tenn.

ERNESTO CARDENAL: REFLECTION TO ACTION

Dow Kirkpatrick WITH HIS trimmed white beard and shell-rimmed glasses, the slim, middle-aged man in dark slacks and open-collared shirt looks more like a poet than a Catholic monk or revolutionary. But Father Ernesto Cardenal of Nicaragua is all three: writer, priest and member of the insurgent Sandinista National Liberation Front there. ¶ The 52-year-old poet-priest, who began his religious life in a Kentucky Trappist monastery, sees no contradiction between religion and revolution. In fact, Cardenal says that contemplating the teach-

ings of the Bible led him and many of his followers to Christian resistance against the regime of Nicaraguan President Anastasio Somoza.

Cardenal celebrated Christmas mass last year as an exile in Costa Rica together with many of the Nicaraguan members of the Christian community he founded on the remote Solentiname archipelago of Lake Nicaragua. They fled their homeland when Somoza's troops occupied Solentiname after a series of Sandinista attacks on government installations in October.

In a borrowed home on the outskirts of San Jose, the political refugees talked about their community and their country.

"Solentiname is very beautiful. Ernesto [Cardenal] came to live among our poverty. That was the first miracle," says Olivia Silva de Guevara, mother of ten children. Six of her sons and daughters took part in the Sandinista raid on the San Carlos military barracks on Oct. 13.

"The second miracle is he brought us the true gospel with love. In Nicaragua the majority of the people are poor, abandoned. Through the gospel a more



dignified life has come to us," Olivia says.

We sat around the table, Olivia and her family. Donaldo was missing—the only one captured. Alejandro, the leader of the attack, and his wife of a few days were there. To make it a eucharist, I had brought bread, cheese and a bottle

of wine. Gloria fried some bananas.

"This is a union of Christians," says Olivia, examining the label on the Spanish wine bottle. "We understand when we share bread and wine that everything is to be shared among all people equally. We don't have the right to give some people less and some more. Jesus divided equally among his disciples."

Cardenal doesn't deny that he is a revolutionary. He says that it is an "honor" to be a Sandinista, named after Augusto Sandino, a peasant leader who fought American intervention in Nicaragua in the 1920s.

"It's my duty as an artist and a priest to belong to this [revolutionary] movement. The poet cannot be a stranger to the people's struggle, much less the priest," he said in an interview.

That Cardenal is a priest-revolutionary is not startlingly new in Latin America. The history of clergy active in guerilla movements goes back to Father Miguel Hidaigo, who launched the Mexican war of independence in 1810 and became a national hero.

But the Nicaraguan priest is the first in modern times to do so with at least the tacit permission of the bishops.

"So far I have had no conflict with the church," says Cardenal, insisting that he does not carry arms or participate in guerilla attacks.

Born of a prominent Nicaraguan family, Cardenal left a promising military career in his country at age 31 for the obscure life of a cloistered monk in the Trappist monastery in Gethsemane, Ky. But there another contemplative author and monk, the late Thomas Merton, urged him to return to Nicaragua after ordination "to found a small lay community without the formalism of the medieval orders."

According to Cardenal, Merton taught him that "the contemplative cannot be aloof from the political struggle, especially in Latin America."

The community, founded in 1966, prospered. Soon Solentiname had a fish and farm cooperative, a clinic and a center for native artisans that has gained

international fame.

The Christian community's life centered around the mass celebrated in the chapel, or in a thatched hut or in the open air on one of the surrounding islands—accompanied by study of the Bible. The campesinos were encouraged to contribute their own insights as to the meaning of the scripture verses.

Cardenal recorded and published these commentaries in *The Gospel in Solentiname*, which has been translated in four languages.

"Contemplation leads to union with God, and it also carried us to revolution," the priest explains.

"Contemplation brought us to the point of identifying with the people, with the oppression they endured. Little by little we became more radical politically, together with the campesinos."

"Looking more deeply at the Bible, we came to understand that the essential gospel message is the bringing about of the kingdom of God here on earth. A just society of brotherhood and love between all human beings, where there are no exploiters and exploited, rich and poor. A society where everyone shares in common, like the first Christians."

How is the gospel of love of neighbor reconciled with the use of violence? "Every authentic revolutionary prefers non-violence," Cardenal answers, "but that is not an option under the Somoza regime."

The Somoza dynasty, frequently accused of flagrant violation of human rights including the massacre of campesinos, has controlled the Michigan-sized Central American nation for over 40 years.

Although Cardenal disclaims any leadership role in the guerilla movement, his influence is credited with winning support for the Sandinistas from a broad spectrum of Somoza opponents—from wealthy businessmen to poor campesinos.

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HOW COMPATIBLE ARE MARX & CHRIST?

Jim Gorman THE ADVANCE literature billed the conference as "The First North American Christian Marxist Conference." While that was true, organizers could be accused of splitting hairs; the well-publicized "Theology in the Americas" conference held in Detroit in the summer of 1975 was about Christianity and Marxism and was held in North America. But there are differences; the focus of this conference was clearly North America and its immediate socio-economic future.

Meeting outside of Philadelphia early this spring, about 200 participants gathered to struggle with the issues raised by Marxism in its varied forms. Participants came from all over the continent—Montreal, the Ivy League East, Chicago, California.

This was an academic conference in tone and process. The setting was bucolic—a creek with azaleas blooming along its bank ran like a Disneyland moat around the conference center. That picturesque scene belied the grueling pace of the plenary presentations and many sectional papers inside.

Besides academics, there were sev-

eral denominational executives present. World and global ministry board executives from at least four denominations attended. That may reflect the fact that the organizing committee is directly linked to the National Council of Churches by a group called "Christians Associated for Relationships with Eastern Europe" (CAREE).

This conference may be a sign that socialism, even Marxism, is again becoming a legitimate topic of conversation among liberal American Christianity. The importance of this conference was that it was not primarily about Marxism as it applies to Europe or Asia

or Latin America (presumably fairly "safe" academic topics). It was a gathering of Christians and Marxists and Christian Marxists to discuss the future of North America's economy and society using, perhaps for the first time in recent years, Marxian tools.

Marxists were invited from all points on the spectrum of the American left; however, it was clear that while democratic socialist Michael Harrington was enthusiastically received, Victor Perlo, economist for the Communist Party, was not. The tone of the conference leaned in favor of what Ernst Bloch called the "warm stream of Marxism."

Christian nervousness about such categories of Marxist theory such as "dialectical materialism" (materialism is the problem) and "economic determinism" were somewhat allayed by wading with Harrington and others in the warm stream. "You either think more organically about the concept of matter," one participant remarked, "or you blame the whole materialist thing on Engels."

But the issue of economic determinism was not so easily dismissed. Charles West, professor of theology at Princeton Theological Seminary and author of several sympathetic books on Marx, asked a younger participant whether he would call himself a Marxist. After saying that he was, the younger man asked West if he could say the same.

"No, I'm not," West said without hesitation. "There seems to me to be other determinants for the human personality than economics." There was

still a hesitancy to reduce the power of God or God's love to purely economic terms.

Though the conference raised many areas of disagreement, the overall feeling was not argumentative. It stands as an indication of the openness with which the participants and their affiliated denominations are approaching dialogue. Though a modest sign, to be sure, its importance is too easily understated.

Many were there seeking tentative answers or positions that would explain how Christians and the Christian church could again accept responsibility for social change. They were asking whether Marx, or some other form of structural critique, could be helpful. Some—those who styled themselves Christian Marxists—had settled some of those questions.

The majority, however, wanted to find ways of working on social and economic justice from the perspective of the church. In a sense, they came to affirm one another in the knowledge that the church—in spite of a well deserved reputation for reactionary politics—still had revolutionary work to do, and that such work was politically feasible and biblically mandated.

It could safely be said that there was considerable agreement that the biblical God is a God of Justice who is impatient with feasts and solemn assemblies while there remains whole classes of people who are structurally excluded from the bounty of creation.

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